

Margaret Sloan-Hunter
National Black Feminist Organization
8 August 1997
(by phone)

Q: The first question is: how long did you participate in NBFO?

M: Well, from the beginning, which was---when was our beginning?

Q: '73?

M: Yeah, but I guess our first meeting as not being NBFO, the people that came out of that meeting is May '93.

Q: May '73?

M: May '73, I'm sorry. I'm in a time warp. And then our---so I would say from that point until let's see---when did I leave New York. [gap in tape] I think the following---so I left New York in November and then blah blah blah. So I left New York in November of '94. I think it was.

Q: And that's when you left the organization---November of '74?

M: '74. But there were a few things that were going on and I think---gee, I'm trying to figure this out because there was a Detroit chapter and there was this fundraiser that we did. When I left New York I moved to Lansing, Michigan and there were some women who were---they had a Detroit chapter at that point and there were some activities that I was involved with then. But sort of, like, I really got out of the activity of it I would say in '74.

years of involvement

Q: Okay.

M: It didn't last very long.

Q: Right. Preceding that, I found some tapes of a tour you went on with Gloria Steinem and you mentioned that you had encountered a lot of women who were interested in black feminism, so I was wondering if that was one of the formative moments of that National Black Feminist Organization, when you went on this speaking tour.

M: Well, we lectured together for a couple of years on sexism and racism and when I left Chicago---I went from Chicago to New York to help get the magazine together [Ms.]---and when I was in Chicago I always believed in having a support group. And so when I was in Chicago I had a support group and I had a group of black feminists who were just a support group, so I always believed in that principal. And then when I moved to---I had no doubt in my mind that black women were not---that black women were interested in feminism because I met so many of them when I was out lecturing all over the country. The contradiction---the way the media portrayed feminism or the feminist movement as the property of white women---that was frustrating because where black women were reluctant to join organizations that were predominately white didn't mean they weren't feminist. And so that's one of the reasons we decided to do NBFO.

media portrayal of feminism

Q: Right. And did this carry over to the group of women---I read something about a group of 30 women who met---and Jane Galvin-Lewis says it was in a hair parlor?

M: You know she has---she has got no sense. We met---the first meeting was---all around New York you'd go to different feminist functions and events and you'd see a black woman here a black woman there and you got to see each other and you'd always wave at these events and so one of the women whose name was Doris Wright, who was also---she was a socialist, but she was also a member of National Organization for Women. She said, "You know, we always see each other at different venues, why don't we just all come together and have a day where we can just talk and get to know each other and what organizations we

first mtg

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represent" and blah blah blah blah. And so she got the NOW office space on a Sunday and so about thirty of us came to that---I have to say off the record: when Jane can't remember something she embellishes. She's my friend, I love her, but we've had some problems over a recent book that's coming out [Deborah Gray White's] with her interpretation of a trip that we all made with Gloria to Paris and she has this whole incident that never took place. But she's older than me. That's what happens---dementia, right? Her brain sort of crunches up, you know.

Q: Okay. Well, I'll double-check a couple of events she told me about.

M: But anyway, so we met there and it was supposed to have been like a few hour-type thing, few hours. And we met there all day and it was really---except for a couple of us because I had had a support group with black women in Chicago, which was one of the most wonderful experiences of my life. Except for me and another woman, these women had not been in a room talking, opening up, basically having a C-R group and it was really great. So at that point there were the feminists---the women who identified themselves as feminists from the group said, "You know, we ought to do this on the larger scale." You know, because this was such a moving experience for many. I mean, we talked about color. You know, black versus light skins, yo mama, my mama, I mean we just---class stuff. It was so---it was wonderful. And so we said, "Hey this experience has to be experienced by some other sisters." So we started figuring out how we were going to do this. Maybe we would---if we know some sisters in Connecticut or some sisters in Jersey---maybe we'd do something. So we sort of said we were going to do this thing and then around the same time there was a lot of---they had the Supreme Court decision on abortion and there was a lot of talk---negativity about abortion and black women. And Jesse Jackson, whom I had worked with when I was very young, he at that time---although he's changed his mind---he at that time said, "Thank God my mother didn't have an abortion. She wouldn't have had me." And everybody was talking about black women and how this abortion decision was really not something that we even related to and there was some other negative press in terms of black women and feminism and everybody that was being quoted was not black feminist. So we got together and---oh, and the feminists from the group, that meeting, we decided that we were going to have like a conference. We were going to have some kind of conference in New York and probably have it some time that winter. So that's what was going on with this group of women. Well, when all of this negative press was coming out, including Ida Lewis and her *Encore* magazine had this picture of this black woman very svelte in this sort of like---

C-R of
1st mtg.

reasons for
neg. abortion
decision,
neg. press.

Q: Like a halter-top?

M: No, not a halter-top. She had a fur on and it had her with her hand out, like saying, like protesting and then it had a picture of Olive Oyl sort of like in the women's symbol and it had her making a muscle. And it had, the title of the cover of the magazine was, "Women's Lib Has No Soul." And so all those things were going on, so we decided we were going to have a press conference. And we were trying to figure out what would we say. Well, we would say this: that we are feminists. We are black feminists. You can't speak for us. We are present and we are, y'know, whatever. So we used the offices of the Women's Action Alliance that was in the same building as *Ms.* It was a smaller office and we said that we'd have this press conference. So we sent out press releases and we go a couple of names, people like Eleanor Holmes Norton was, um, she came to the press conference and spoke. Several of us spoke and we had this press conference. And all this press showed up, I mean, from all over. We had *Das Spiegel*, German press---y'know a little bitty office and all this press was there. I think they thought maybe we were going to talk about castration and shit like that. I don't know what they thought, but I said, "Damn!" And so basically we had---I can't remember. Now I'm looking at our statement of purpose---no, that didn't come until after. Yeah, that didn't come until after the press conference, but we basically had this press conference and blah blah and did this talk and then went home. And the next day I came back to the Women's Action Alliance to thank them for letting us---'cause we really disrupted their office because all this press was there, we were there and they really didn't get to do too much of their work. So I came upstairs---'cause *Ms.* was on the third floor and I think the Alliance was on the sixth floor---and I came up to thank them. I got there up about maybe eleven o'clock and they said, "We're so glad you came. The phone has been ringing off the hook." And I was really sort of nervous 'cause I said, "Oh god, we're going to get all these calls from black men telling us we're selling out the race and all the shit we'd heard before." And I think the first call I picked up was the call from a woman in---she was somewhere out West here, saying, you

press conference

flood of calls

know, "Where is the Wyoming chapter?" or something like that and I said, "What?" And because, you know, it had been in the *New York Times*, it had been all over and all these calls from these women wanting to know how could they get involved and how do you New Yorkers have this thing and nobody else knows about it.

Oh, that's right. We called---I'm sorry. I leaving out an important part: we lied. We made up---we said, "We are the National Black Feminist Organization" at the press conference. And we said, "We have been existing---" That's right. 'Cause we didn't have any---we weren't an organization. We were just women getting this conference together. We were not an organization. That was it. 'Cause that's how the name--- and just before the press conference, you know, the night before we said, "We'll call ourselves the National Black Feminist Organization". Lord have mercy. We fought over that one. So then when the guys in the press---I remember he asked us how many members we had and we said, "Oh, hundreds. You know, we don't really want to give that information out." So we weren't an organization. So after we started writing down all these women's names that were calling in and we decided that this conference we were gonna have wasn't gonna be just a New York, New Jersey, Connecticut thing this was going to be national. And so we started getting all our stuff together and meeting and preparing for this conference that was held. And that's basically how we came together. It was sort of by accident. I think in some ways, not the concept was an accident, but I think that probably had we been more organized---if we'd started out to form an organization possibly it would have been real different and maybe it would have been more sustaining. We didn't---I mean, we were incorporating because we knew we were going to have to be having money come in for this conference and church that we rented and all this stuff and the little foundation grant that we got---[interruption] We had to do things like incorporate, come up with by-laws, and all that stuff we did and in the mean time, trying to get this conference together. And we all, you know, were working full-time. I was working over at *Ms.* and then I think Steinem got us some office space for free in this high-rise place over on Madison Avenue and I was between working---it was sort of crazy and I wish that we had had the time to really do it right, but you know that's the way it was and it had an impact in those women's lives for the short time it did live.

deception/
accident
of forming

* for
grants!

Q: Right. So you had to come up with things like a dues structure and then I have a copy of a policy paper that talks about the steering committee and all that stuff. You had to come up with that right before the conference?

M: [laughter] Yes. And I think I wrote the statement of purpose and they all seemed to like it so we kept it. I'm looking at this thing with out little black symbol---our little black women's symbol. We did some cutie little things [laughter]. Oh, we were doing it!

author of
statement of
purpose

Q: Probably scared some people at the time.

M: Oh, we did. "Ooh, what is this?"

Q: So you were---I read something that said you were either the president or the chair of the organization?

M: I was the first chair and I don't think we had anybody after that [laughing]. I'm not sure. There might have been, but somebody told me, like, five years after I left New York, "Oh yeah that D.C. chapter was going strong." And I said, "What?!? Who is there?" So I don't know, but some people told me there were little chapters hither and dither, so I don't know.

Q: Were you voted in as chair or did you just sort of de facto end up---

M: No, we had a vote. There were a couple of people who clearly didn't want me to be because I'm wasn't---I'm not a socialist and so that was a problem. Oh, boy, we had such a fight because at that time the Socialist Worker Party was very active in a lot of organizations. They would become members of different organizations where they'd try to set the agenda and it was very difficult and we had a couple of---in fact, I saw her. That woman who gave me so much hell and she was in the supermarket about a year ago and I said, "Haddie! What are you doing here?" And she said---I don't know what she was doing and I said, "Are you still with SWP?" And she said, "Yes, I am." And I said, "Okay, bye." This was, like, twenty or

voted in as
chair

something years later, but anyway---so that was another thing. And then we had a couple of Nationalist women---I always figured, you know, if I'm invited to a party and I go to it and I don't like the music, if they don't change the music I have the option to leave. I never understood, but I mean, that's some people's agenda. We had some Nationalist women who---we had free meeting space at the Women's Action Alliance. It was an organizations that, actually Jane was in it and she was black and she was able to get the space. I think there was three women that worked there, two white and one black, they didn't want to meet there because it was in a white women's office, you know. They didn't want to take the foundation money because it came from the white people. I said, "Well, you know, barbecue place and all they ain't giving us no money so we're taking this money. If they're going to give money for us to have a black feminist conference---yes." With no strings attached? I'd be a fool not to take it. So it was those kinds of struggles. It was back and forth and it was sort of draining, but we still had the conference and it was wonderful. It was great.

Nationalist
women in
ny.

Q: So those are they types of arguments you remember---or just discussions---having in the group?

M: Oh, BIG fights [laughter].

Q: Can you give me an example of others or even just events that stand out as significant for the group.

Stepped
here

M: Well, one of the significant things was we were---in the short time that we were doing this stuff, we were in coalition with a lot of the predominately white feminist organizations so when events would come up---we held in a coalition---getting New York City having a domestic workers' Bill of Rights. One of the groups that coalesced with us was National Committee of Household Employment, which were maids who had organized and changed the name to domestic workers and they said, "We don't mind doing the work we're doing. We just want to get paid for it." So we went in buses up to Albany state capitol with NOW and NWPC and a bunch of different groups and got that legislation on the books. We also visited CBS in strong coalition objecting to a made-for-TV movie on this---about rape, which was horrible. So we went up to the corporate offices and we got them to put a disclaimer in on the TV, which cost them hundreds of thousands of dollars. You know, saying that this does not depict all rapes or women---we do not mean to imply that women enjoyed rape and everything. That was a big deal. Let's see. We participated with New York City Sex Crimes Analysis Unit. It was the first one in the country and it got headed up by a woman and it was a unit that dealt with women when they got raped. Many times women wouldn't report rape because male cops would come there and they would feel humiliated. In fact, one incident that really turned the key to getting the sex crimes unit funded and founded I think was a woman was raped and she called a cop and the cop raped her. And so, we participated in that and got a mobile van and we went into Harlem, in the black community and had this van that told women, you know, stop rape. You don't have to---it's not your fault, you know, you didn't ask for it. And we got women coming---we showed them what to do, how to protect themselves and all kinds of stuff. And we had---the thing that touched me about that---I had this eighty year old sister from Harlem that came up to me and whispered in my ear, "You know, I was raped when I was a little girl and I never told nobody." And she said, "But I never forgot that." And she just started crying and I thought, "Jesus Christ." So we did that. And we participated in a couple of conferences. I think there was a conference on violence against women, I believe. Yeah, I'm seeing the auditorium and I don't even know where it was but I remember we did that. So there were a lot of things that we participated in. Like I said, we were---it was a short time, but---

Coalition
work: NCHC,
CBS

rape activism

Q: It was an intense short time.

M: Yes, it was a very intense short time.

Q: So, in your opinion did NBFO espouse any particular political ideology when it was formed?

M: Well, it seems to me that those of us who were feminists in it really wanted---we wanted an organization that was fighting the two fault---two prong battle of sexism and racism. For example, if you're going to write a children's book, it impresses us that you have black kids in the book and multi-racial characters. But if you're going to have the little girl kind of hanging behind the tree, waiting for her hero brother to kind of clear the path for her, that doesn't do it. We felt that you had to fight those battles on the

anti-
racism
sexism
as politics

same time because if you didn't black women would come up short. And also it wasn't good for the entire black race to not deal with over half the population of that race, so that was really our thinking in terms of--if there was a politics, that was it.

Q: So it didn't really fall along lines of radical or socialist or liberal?

M: Now that part, I can't really speak for the group. I know that my philosophy has always been that feminism is inherently radical and so if you put adjectives onto it, it makes it seem as if feminism is not enough. And I have always believed that if the goals of feminism were realized, there would probably be a revolution in this country. There has to be an economic revolution in this country because the system, just on the one demand of equal pay for equal work---the system, this present capitalist system can't afford to pay women what we're worth without the structure changing. The whole structure would have to change. I mean, they try to control the means of production, which is women's bodies. So that's why women have, I think the abortion thing has gone on---the debate. And the tyranny and the killing and the bombings and all that stuff. I mean, that's the real serious, heavy-duty thing and it's all about women wanting reproductive freedom. So that's my philosophy. I think people probably saw the women---any time you do a first people see you as radical. We had women in there, I mean, who I wouldn't call---if I have to use the expression "radical feminist"---but they were very committed to black women and feminism and some of them worked in fields where they saw what sexism and patriarchy had done to black women. I was thinking the other day that really had we been a real surviving organization, we probably would have been in the forefront of this whole---well, now people are just realizing about the female genital mutilation that's happening to African women---it's been happening to African women. You know, I was thinking, boy, that would really be---that would have been a good issue to get behind with a powerful black feminist voice. But Alice Walker has done a lot to expose that. But that's the kind of thing that we tried to touch and raise consciousness about because nobody else was doing it from a black women's perspective.

* feminism
w/o analysis

current impact
NBFO could have
had.

Q: So do you recall if there were---you mentioned there were people from the Socialist Worker's Party in the group---

M: There were two.

Q:---do you recall ideological disputes that would come up during meetings?

M: It was just stuff about race and there was ideological stuff about whether we were going to---the group was multi-sexual. I mean, there were straight women and bisexuals and lesbians. And I think that there was a fear that people would think that we were a lesbian organization---god forbid---so they didn't want us to---those of us who were lesbians---I think that they wanted to sort of keep that---it was sort of like NOW in the early days. You know, "we know you're running this. We know you're the best, but let's just keep that down." And I remember when I was on a lecture circuit and I went to some place in Michigan to speak and Nikki Giovanni had just---had just preceded me in speaking and somebody asked her what did she think of the National Black Feminist Organization. And she said, well, she supposed it was okay, but they really did a disservice by having their first president, chairwoman be an openly lesbian---be an open lesbian. So Nikki, who is closet, she and her lover, Ida Lewis, owned *Encore* magazine at that time. When I came back to New York, I said---I called her up and I said, "You know, Nikki, whatever you do with your life is your business, but the next time you use my name publicly," I said, "I'm going to have a press conference and I'm going to blow the hinges off your closet door." But I thought that was really sort of sleazy. So stuff like that, you know, any time a group of women gather people assume you're lesbian so that was what they said about a lot of the organizations during that time. It wasn't a big concern---it wasn't a big, big issue, but it was a concern. It was a concern. But when we had our conference one of our workshops was on sexuality and I think we said lesbianism.

lesbianism,
Nikki G.

Q: Okay. How did you perceive the relationship of the National Office with the local chapters?

M: I didn't.

Q: Were you in contact with them or was that---

M: Well, you know, when I left I think people kept certain things going. There was a Chicago chapter and there was a ---that crazy woman. God, Brenda. Now I remember. 'Cause I was invited to come there and I just remembered that I did this mediation between these two factions of the Chicago chapter.

Chicago
& Brenda
starting chpt
w/o Nat'l
Office approval

Q: So between Brenda Eichelberger and another---

M: Oh, god. I just got ill. I just forgot about it. I totally forgot about that. But I taped all that shit and I don't know where it went. But she was going to do what she was going to do. So there was a Chicago chapter. In fact, she wrote to us one day and said, "I'm Brenda Eichelberger. I've started---" She just said she started a chapter. And we weren't---I'm telling you we were not organized in that way and then we knew there was a Detroit chapter. And these are women, I think, who came from the conference and went back and started chapters. And there was a Washington D.C. chapter and somebody told me the other day that there was a chapter somewhere that I never heard of. So there were these little chapters, I'm not even sure. They might have put on things or put on events. I have no idea.

Q: But this was before there was any sort of chapter outline or guidelines so people really just started them without any guidance from the National Office.

M: I don't know. I think we did do packets and I think that---I think they got those packets---but Brenda is the one, I think, who started the chapter without---she just basically said that she was real excited and she met with some women that were really excited about being a chapter and blah blah blah. And we didn't have the resources to go there and be at their opening chapter meeting or anything like that. That's sort of hard to remember. You know, I'm 50. But I know we did do that, but I don't know if people followed that or not. I really don't know because I left New York, so I don't know how much longer it went on.

Q: One thing that someone told me was that they thought it was just difficult because the organization grew so quickly---

M: Oh, man.

Q: ---they thought it was difficult to keep track of the chapters and to, you know, just know what everyone was up to.

M: Yeah, we had like 1500---at that conference we had 1500 women I think and everybody signed membership cards. And it was staggering! It was really staggering. We never dreamed that many women were coming and we thank god we got that church because we never dreamed it was going to be that big. We didn't do any national advertising except Ms. gave us a little bitty block ad in, I think, in maybe August or September, said National Black Feminist Organization. But we didn't have any money so we didn't do any national advertising and boom! When I went around with Gloria and lectured I would mention it, you know, and say, "If you're interested in this contact me" and they would. But, I mean, that was it. It was word-of-mouth. That was it.

mag. made of
conference.

Q: Okay. So your tour with Gloria Steinem overlapped with the beginning of the group?

M: Well, I had been touring with Gloria since before I left Chicago. I came to New York in January of '72 and so we continued lecturing. Flo Kennedy couldn't---she felt like she was too ill to do lecturing and she was Gloria's initial partner and then Dorothy Pitman Hughes just couldn't fly. She couldn't take flying so I would lecture. We didn't do too much market research for the magazine so what would happen is that because of Gloria's prominence people would want her to come and lecture and we would say, "Ah, okay and we can sell magazines! Let's tell them about the magazine" and meet women.

Q: Tie it all together. How do you think NBFO was viewed by other organizations and by that I mean Black Nationalist organizations, mainstream black feminist organizations, or white feminists?

M: Well, I think when---for some reason feminism has not been---I don't know why that word has had the suspicion it has. I remember even Alice Walker one time said she wasn't a feminist, she was a womanist---whatever the fuck that meant. I said, "Alice, what is a womanist?" But anyway, you know---hello? And so it was really funny when you---after our press conference I don't recall any of the black organizations writing us letters and saying, "Hey great work, you guys." [laughter] I don't think we got any of that kind of stuff because feminist equaled manhater and blah blah blah and whatever. But we would always---I remember being in that office and getting calls asking us if we would endorse this or whatever. So how we were perceived I think, at that time, in 1973 people just---I don't think they knew what to make of us. I do know that when I went to lecture---I remember I was at some school and [laughter]---some college and these young black men were sitting, like, the third row. And they were extremely tall so I figured right away they were basketball players in the third row. And during my lecture---oh, Gloria would speak and then I would speak and then we would take questions and answers. And usually, if you've done this enough, you sort of know where people laugh at what you say and this and that and these three brothers just didn't change the expression on their face. And I thought, "Oh, shit!" You know, I'm going to be attacked in the question and answer, they're gonna talk about this and that. So---and after people had been there were asking me questions, so then we were leaving---a lot of times people come up to have us autograph stuff or just ask us more detailed or personal stuff. So everybody was gone and these three boys were sort of hanging around. And so this one guy came up to me and he said---you know, he was probably about nineteen---and he said, "You know, the reason I'm here is because I lost." And I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, we knew you were coming in town, so we had straws and the one who got the shortest straw had to come here you speak," and he said, "I didn't have any idea of what you were going to be talking about except I thought you were going to be talking about how the brothers are this and the brothers are that." And he started crying. He said, "I really never thought about my attitudes towards sisters and then I think about now how my brothers have those attitudes towards women which mean they have those attitudes toward my sisters," and he said, "This is really a big deal," and he said, "I just wanted to tell you I will never forget the things you said." And I couldn't believe it, you know. And I'm standing there with my---I have a big mouth and I'm standing there I couldn't even---and he said, "May I hug you?" And I said, "Yes" and we hugged. So it would be individual things like that. I would get a lot of response from the people that I was supposed to have all the problems with and that happened in different ways all around the country. It was interesting. So in terms of black organizations, nobody ever asked us for endorsements or anything.

reactions of other black women, black men, black org.

Public speaking experience of Black men here on a date.

In terms of white feminist organizations, I think that they were happy of our existence because they had been saying, many of them---well, Aileen Hernandez, she's a black woman, she's out here in San Francisco and she was the second President of NOW, you know---and they had been saying all along that this is not just a white women's thing. This movement is for everywoman, but women of color didn't want to hear that. So we---it's so funny. It was really interesting in how groups perceive you. Gloria could say something to a black group and they'd be skeptical. If I said the exact same thing they would get up and stamp their feet. Likewise, if there was a group---a particular kind of white group that we'd go speak with, I'd say they'd sort of like shine me on and Gloria would say it and it was law. So it was just interesting how that---so I think the white feminist organizations were happy and also coalitions are much better. So we went to Albany to confront them about how they treated domestic workers and there was no bill. Or when we went to AB---uh, CBS about their movie they couldn't just dismiss it. It wasn't just their wives and they were saying, "Honeys, go home." We were sitting up there saying, "Look, this offends all women" and it really made an impact for the short time it was---and I still believe coalitions make much more of an impact because they can't split you up and they can't just say, "It's just your group. Whereas the rest of you say that this is impacting everybody. Where are they? They're not here."

reactions of white feminists

Q: Would you say that you had allies with NOW or other groups? I mean, would you call them allies or would you separate that from coalition work?

M: No, I think they were clearly allies because allies, I think, look out for you and tell you certain things or show up certain places. They also lend money and support. You know, they gave money and support. At the same time, we got to---this is again, my perception, my perception of things at that time---I think that they---we would be called on anything that was going down. It's just that there wasn't enough of us, at least

allies

in New York, to answer every call. If somebody was being deceptive or somebody was giving something up, they wanted us to be a part of it so they would call us and let us know.

Q: So what was the Eastman Foundation because I noticed that you got funding?

M: The Eastman Foundation was a foundation that, I think, Jane knew about. It was a small family fund and they just gave a little---well, I don't know if that's not true because I just noticed that I was watching NET the other night [WNET? Public TV in NYC] and there was something the "Beatrice and Somebody Eastman Fund". But they gave---again, it might have been Jane that knew about them or maybe it was Gloria? I'm not even sure anymore, but they gave money for us to put the conference on.

Q: Okay. Were you aware of any other black women's organizations that were active around the same time period?

M: Uh, yes. There was National Negro Council and National---god, the group that I was in when I was a little itty bitty girl in Chicago---Colored Women---National Association of Colored Women's Club. But they didn't have a chapter in New York, I don't think. At least I didn't know of a chapter in New York, but yeah. Dorothy Height's group. There was another group that sprung up. Oh, no. I think that was after us. The National Coalition of 100 Black Women. No, that sprung up after NBFO.

Q: Do you remember having any communication with Dorothy Height at all?

M: Well, Jane did. Jane used to work for Dorothy---Mrs. Height as we call her. Somebody told me that the woman who started the Washington D.C. chapter, who was married to the doctor---when President Carter invited women from different organizations to the White House. I know National Negro Council was there and this woman from NBFO was invited to the White House also [Eichelberger mentions this. Were they both invited or is Sloan confusing Benoit with Eichelberger?], but I can't think of her name.

Q: Was it Jo Benoit?

M: Yeah, yeah, that's her. God, what is she doing now, I wonder.

Q: If I find out I'll let you know. Do you recall having any adversaries? The organization having any adversaries?

M: The organization?

Q: Yes.

M: Um, no.

Q: Besides *Encore* magazine, I guess.

M: Not really. I was going to say the socialist---no, not really.

Q: I've requested to see if there are any FBI files so if I find out anything---

M: And you might, honey. Yeah, you might.

Q: So in your opinion what do you think they NBFO accomplished?

M: I think that we showed that black women were, in fact, feminists and that didn't mean that they were selling out the black race by wanting to have their issues as women be included in the struggle for, you know, African American independence. And as somebody said, "You can't have liberation for half a race." And the black movement in the '60s that many of us came out of, basically, was a male liberation movement and thank God it happened, but I just wonder how much more it could have---how much further

accomplished -
man

it could have gone. It was very patriarchal, very male and the women we celebrate today from that era are three widows who are known primarily---I mean, they've done good works and everything, but they pretty much were married to icons. I think that one of the things we accomplished was putting black feminism on the map and maybe so that like twenty years later we can know that you're around here doing research on us and that's impressive.

Q: Any other things that you think were accomplished? Not that that's a small thing.

M: No, I know what you're saying. And the conference. I think the conference was the first time that black women gathered to prioritize issues under feminism and it was a moving a wonderful experience. *accomplishment*

Q: Yeah, I wish I could have been there.

M: Well, we'll have to do another one. I realized after I---I don't know if you know about it. Remember when the whole Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill thing happened and black women were asked to take out an ad in the New York Times and we filled the *New York Times* with all these black women's names. And I'm saying to myself, "Boy, that would make a helluva conference if every one of those women---". I mean, God it was so many women and I'm going through and I'm reading some of the names and I'm like, "I know her! I know her! I wonder what city she's in." But it was really amazing how that came together.

Q: And in a few days, too.

M: Oh, yeah. I got a call from somebody in LA that said you've got to call this number. It's a number in Ann Arbor. These sisters have this line and you put your name down and send them some money. And I said who are these---and "I don't know, but you do it." So I called up and gave---

[end of side 1]

Q: I went to school in Ann Arbor and it was Elsa Barkley Brown and Barbara Ransby. [babbling about African American Women in Defense of Ourselves]

M: That was amazing how quickly that happened. The word of mouth. Somebody in LA called me to tell me to call Michigan. I was, like, wow. And I was calling people and they were calling a number. And it filled up this paper and I thought, "Now that's something." That was really something. Don't tell me there's no consciousness out there. It was unbelievable.

I have another friend in LA, she's an attorney in LA---we want to do one about O.J. Not all of us believe he's innocent, honey.

Q: Can I send you the twenty dollars now?

M: I mean, that's one of our projects. During the whole thing we were calling each other up, "Can you believe this?!?" Who are the black people they're talking to? Every black person I know says he's guilty. Who are they talking to?

Q: They edited out everybody else.

M: They'd gone to the churches. That's what it is. Well, is there anything else?

Q: Yeah, a couple more. So you left the organization, right?

M: Yes, I was into depression and all kinds of stuff. I was just going through a terrible time in my life. Oh god, I have this little NBFO folder I keep and I think I should do something with this newspaper article. It's yellow. "Blacks Start a Women's Lib Group". God, they couldn't even say liberation. *left org.*

Q: This was in November of '74 you said, when you left the group?

M: When I left? Um hm.

Q: And why do you think the organization doesn't exist anymore?

M: Let's see. Are you asking why that organization doesn't exist or why isn't there a black feminist organization?

Q: First, why NBFO and then the other?

M: Well, I think. Oh, I don't know. I wish that we could have had somebody to---that could have paid the staff person a year to work on that organization because then I think it might have still existed. Who knows, but it would have existed longer than it did. But there was nobody to run the organization in a clerical sense even. So that was a problem, I think. I don't know why, but maybe if I could have stayed around we could have maybe wrote some foundation grants and gotten some money because I think the time was right for it. Certainly with Frank Thomas at the Ford Foundation [?] we could have gotten some money, but I just don't know. People were tired and there had been a lot of bickering. You know, the ups and downs of it and everything. I don't know. When I left I thought things were going to continue for lots of different reasons, but I don't know. I think about it now because there was a lot of things we didn't know about. We didn't know about things like co-dependency. We didn't know things about being adult children of alcoholics. There was a lot of power struggle because we were so powerless. There was a lot of stuff just going on and I don't know why it didn't continue because NOW certainly has those kinds of struggles, but they also had money initially, which makes a difference. Money is a great equalizer, you know. So I really don't know. I've thought about it a lot because so many times I think, "If we had NBFO we could just send out a card and say, 'Stop this shit'."

decline
- finances
- pd organization

personal
issues

Q: So why do you think there isn't a black feminist organization now---at the national level?

M: Well, I don't know. I don't know. I don't know [laughter]. I have no idea. Every five years I talk to some women and we say, "Maybe we should start something," and we say, "Yeah, let's do it." We keep thinking that some young women are going to do it. I mean, I was young when I did that and I think you have a lot of energy. You don't have things about health. I mean, we used to get together and we used to talk about the people who we were turned on to. Now we get together and we talk about arthritis, who had a hip replacement. That kind of shit and it's really amazing. Like things just change. But I don't know whether the country would be ripe for it or not, but I know there's a lot of black women out there who clearly identify as feminist and I think that they feel that they're by themselves and they're alone. And that hasn't changed since when we did it. We would get these letters from these women who would be in these places saying, "My god, I thought I was crazy. Maybe they're right. I want to be white. Just because I want simple justice for black women." We'd get these comments all the time. "Thank you, NBFO, for being there." We even fantasized. Let's start a magazine so these women who can't come to New York every month for a meeting, we'll make this magazine. I don't know. We had all these dreams and we just didn't do them.

contemporary
black
feminism

Q: Two more questions, easy ones. Do you know the current whereabouts of any former members?

M: Oh, yeah. Bessida White. She's in Silver Springs, MD. She's an attorney. I always liked her because she was a heterosexual feminist who really could hang with lesbians. She didn't have any problem with that. And she confronts black men's sexism all the time. I haven't seen her in years and when they had the first Gay and Lesbians March in D.C. I contacted her, found her number, and I was going to stay with her and then I didn't go. I'll have to look her number up and I can certainly get that for you because I'm sure she'd love to talk to you about it.

Q: Let's see. I spoke with Jane Galvin-Lewis and Deborah Singletary and Eugenia Wilshire.

M: You did speak to Deborah? Ah, Eugenia. She changed her name after NBFO [laughter]. She had another totally different name. Dorothy was her name. What about what's her name that was at Time

magazine. She and I wrote the rebuttal. The other thing that *Encore* magazine was right a terrible article about the NBFO conference so we call came---we sat in at the *Encore* office with Ida Lewis.

Encore
4/74, 6/74
sit-in
@ Encore

Q: So this was *Encore*, not *Essence*?

M: No, *Encore*. *Encore* magazine. We sat in and she was going to call the police. We said, "Go ahead" and she didn't. So we got---Margo. Margo Jefferson. She was at time.

Q: She won a Pulitzer, I think.

M: She did? Wow. I have some names and numbers, but I'd really have to look it up.

Q: Well, that ties in with the last question about if you have any sort of documentation you'd be willing to share with me?

M: Oh, yeah. I'll send you a bunch. I was going to do that this week, but this has been a crazy week. I don't know if it's worth, but I'll xerox some of this shit and send it to you.

Q: Where do you work now?

M: I work for Social Security/Disability for the State of California.

Q: And do you do free lance writing now?

M: I just had a poetry book that came out in '95. It was called *Black and Lavender*. I do stuff here and there. I was sick for a while. Over the past two years I was really sick, but now I'm okay. So I've sort of slowed down, but I write here and there and people ask me to do stuff. I do workshops. I do racism workshops. I do workshops on co-dependency. But mainly I work. I have my eight-hour-a-day job that funds my irreverent activity. I'm a public servant.

Q: But the state funds everything else.

[end of interview]